

# DICE of DESTINY

By  
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## SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Senor don Antonio de la Guerra, wealthy Spanish ranch owner on the American side of the Mexican border, is informed by his American attorney that a technical error has been found in his will. The error signs a new document without reading it.

CHAPTER II—Teresa, only grandchild of the senor, finds evidence of a struggle in the library and her grandfather's missive. The belief is that the senor has been carried across the border by Mexican rebels. Teresa, a sweetheart, takes command of the situation and orders the servants and vaqueros to arm themselves.

CHAPTER III—Stanway, with twenty men, starts in pursuit of the rebels. They capture Eduardo Ramon, Torre, kinsman of Teresa, who has been wounded, and come, by the escaping rebels.

CHAPTER IV—Stanway loses the rebels and returns to the hacienda. Teresa shows him the copy of the new will which she has found and which leaves all the property to Torre.

## CHAPTER V.

### The Game Begins.

Teresa de la Guerra's face went red and white, and Torre, seeing, smiled. She heard in the words only an insult to her beloved papa grande, knowing as she so well knew that of all men the old Spaniard hated his arrogant young kinsman most implacably.

"We don't understand," she said presently, turning her back upon the man at table and addressing Stanway. "Perhaps Captain Juarez' call will clear matters for us. Will you come with me, Senor Stanway?"

Torre's face darkened as he watched them go out together.

In the drawing room, in much worn uniform bespeaking his rank, a very broad, heavy-set Mexican, swarthy, hard-featured, keen-eyed, was waiting. He bowed deeply as they entered.

"Senorita," he said briskly, his eyes disregarding Stanway and resting upon the girl's face in a keen regard. "It is an unpleasant duty which brings me here this morning."

"Be seated," he said quietly, going to a chair. "But first, Captain Juarez, this is my friend, Senor Stanway of the Painted Rock ranch."

The two men bowed coolly. Stanway remained standing near the girl's chair, while Juarez sat down.

"Of poor Mexico," said the captain shortly, "are fighting hard for a dear cause. We sacrifice ourselves, our hopes, our homes for the thing we love most, senorita."

"And that is our country. We do things which we do not like to do simply because it is our duty to take any opportunity which chance gives us to free the neck of our land from the foot of the tyrant."

Teresa bowed.

"And you have called this morning; you have crossed the border—"

"At the behest of a Mexican's duty. Senorita, your grandfather is well and sends his love to you."

"Tell me," she cried impetuously, "where is he?"

"Many miles beyond the border," he answered succinctly. "In the hands of friends—if he accedes to our demands," significantly.

"And those demands?" curiously.

"I have not as yet made of him," returned the captain. "Allow me to explain, senorita. I know Senor de la Guerra, if not personally at least very well by repute. I know that he does not love my Mexico, and that he is very stubborn."

"Our cause needs money and he has it in great, unnecessary quantities. Had I made a demand upon him for a note to you, stating that he was held for ransom and urging you to pay it, I know that he would have refused. So I come straight to you, without so much as a word to him, informing you that unless the money is sent immediately—"

He broke off, shrugging his shoulders.

"You realize, senor," broke in Stanway coolly, "that this is rather an unusual sort of thing at this day? That it is not without danger to you? If the senorita were not disposed to give what you ask, if on the other hand we held you for the crime you have committed—"

Again the captain shrugged.

"It would mean imprisonment for me, or perhaps death," he answered promptly. "Things which a soldier faces every day of his life and grows to think nothing about. And—pardon me, senorita—it would mean the death of the Senor de la Guerra."

Again a little shiver trembled through the frame of the girl. Stanway's eyes steady upon the Mexican's, was silent a moment. Finally he said, turning to Teresa:

"Before you give this gentleman his answer, senorita, may I ask for a few words with you?"

"May I interrupt again?" It was Eduardo Ramon Torre, insolent and disdainful, bowing in the doorway, a fresh, unlighted cigarette between his fingers. "Buenos dias, Senor el Capitán."

Captain Juarez stared at him fixedly, his hand eyes as insolent as those of Torre, and made no answer.

"I think, senor," went on Torre in mock courtesy, still lounging in the doorway, "that it is with me that you wish to deal. Am I not right, prima mia?" lightly to Teresa.

The girl's eyes darkened. Juarez looked from one to another curiously.

"Let your keen eyes rest on this," Torre drew the will from his pocket and carelessly tossed it into Juarez' lap.

The Mexican looked at it swiftly, his eye ran down the written sheet, and he started palpably when his glance rested upon the name Eduardo Ramon Torre.

"I have been misinformed," he cried, starting to his feet. "The senorita is not the heiress. It is Senor Torre who inherits!"

"Seguro," replied Torre, putting out his shapely hand for the will. "And I, senor, am that Senor Torre. Now, what do you want?"

"This is true, senorita?" Juarez whirled about, his eyes bright and hard upon Teresa's.

"You come from papa grande," she answered him guardedly. "Did he not tell you of a change in his will?"

"We did not speak," Juarez reminded her. "As I have said, I knew that it would be useless to talk with him. He knows only that he is being held; he does not know why. I know only, and he resorted to the shrug so much a part of his method of speech, that rumor has it that you are his heiress, and this paper states that Torre inherits."

"Rumor at times is misinformed," Torre said smilingly. "You have the will and testament itself before you. If it is sufficiently plain that I and not the senorita," with an apologetic bow to Teresa, "represent my kinsman; I trust that you will state your errand concisely."

"It is this," said Juarez shortly. "El Senor de la Guerra is held by my men for ransom. Twenty thousand dollars will bring him back to you promptly, without a scratch on him. A refusal to pay will be a signal for his death."

"So," remarked Torre coolly. "It is only twenty thousand dollars. You are modest, senor!"

"American money," Juarez added as coolly.

"American money," nodded Torre. "That is better than Mexican pesos, at any rate. It is at least less insulting to my kinsman."

Captain Juarez made no reply. Teresa and Stanway looked at each other swiftly.

Torre, smiling as though the whole matter were merely amusing, addressed himself to the girl.

"Teresa," and she flushed under the easy familiarity, "perhaps the valiant captain has not yet breakfasted. He has a long ride before him and it would be better if he should not carry away a misunderstanding of the De la Guerra hospitality. Also, while he has his coffee, you and I might discuss the situation?"

"Yes," the girl agreed slowly. "That would perhaps be best." Her hand went to the bell cord to summon Pedro.

"We have just breakfasted, senor captain. If you will go with Pedro he will see that you are served. And Senor Torre, Senor Stanway and myself can avail ourselves of the time to come to a decision."

The captain bowed, and with no hesitation turned his back on them to follow the servant to the dining room. Torre came in, sat down, crossing his legs with elaborate care to the crease in his trousers, and favored Stanway with a look which mocked openly.

"An interesting situation, it is not, senor?" he asked lightly.

"An extremely hazardous game you are playing, Torre," cried Stanway angrily.

"I?" Torre lifted his brows. "It is not I who play. It is I who watch the game."

"Watch the pawns your own fine hand has set moving?" was Stanway's heated retort. "Do you think that you can get away with a thing of this kind, Torre? Why, man, it smells to heaven!"

"Recriminations aside—at least shall we postpone them? There is a crisis demanding attention. Now," lifting his hand against Stanway's words, "I have a proposition to make—to you, Teresa."

"What is it?" she asked coolly.

"Merely this: As heark to the De la Guerra estate I may be a prejudiced person. You, with no personal interest, and a quick light flicked in his eyes at the girl's wincing at his words, "are the one to decide. Shall the captain's request be granted? I leave it to you, senorita. Entirely to you."

Teresa bit her lip, the color surging angrily into her cheeks. She saw the trap as plainly as did Torre, as plainly as Stanway saw it. And she did not see the answer to make.

"It is perhaps not impossible," went on Torre evenly, "that a large part of the sum mentioned is now on the premises. We all know that my kinsman has always been his own banker; that he at all times has been able to produce a large amount of gold at a moment's notice."

"Unfortunately, in answering his summons to the rancho, I came too late for him to make me cognizant of the hiding place. Perhaps you, prima mia, are better informed?"

"Perhaps," she answered him quietly, though the color still ran red in her cheeks.

"And perhaps," added Stanway significantly, "Senor Torre would be glad to have knowledge of this banco; would be glad to have the money handed over to his emissary?"

"Emissary?" Again Torre's black brows arched. "The fabrications of the Americano's suspicions are truly wonderful! He would suspect me of robbing myself?"

He laughed insolently. Stanway looked questioningly at the girl.

"Prima mia," began Torre.

The girl whirled upon him, her eyes flashing.

"Senor Torre," she cried passionately, "you make it necessary for me to remind you that our relationship is not of my choosing and that we are not close enough for you to call me cousin! If you find it necessary to address me at all I should like to be addressed as Senorita de la Guerra. Please remember."

Torre flushed angrily but managed his careless smile.

"As you wish, Senorita de la Guerra," he retorted. "May I suggest something?"

"What is it?" shortly.

"Merely this: This man who calls himself Captain Juarez may be a rank impostor, as well as a scoundrel. Before even considering the matter of a ransom would it not be well to ask him to prove to us that he knows at least where our kinsman is? If you rang for Pedro again and sent him with the message—"

Teresa rang and sat in a musing silence until Pedro came.

"Pedro," she said then, "tell Captain Juarez that we are considering his proposition. Tell him further that we wish to be certain that he really comes from the senor."

Pedro bowed, withdrew, and returned almost immediately, his face strangely white, his hand shaking as he held out something to the girl.

"It is the master's ring," he said, deeply agitated. "The ring he wore always upon his left hand. Senorita, senorita," his voice choking, his eyes glistening, "you will not let them kill him?"

"No, Pedro." She took the ring, her own eyes shining. "If harm comes to him, Pedro," she went on steadily, "we shall know what to do, shall we not?"

Pedro made no spoken answer. But his eyes, suddenly hard and cruel, went straight to Torre, resting full of meaning upon him. Then, turning abruptly, the servant left the room.

"It is papa grande's ring, Senor Stanway." She ignored Torre entirely. "I am afraid that Captain Juarez speaks the truth."

Stanway stood with drawn brows, staring at the floor. The whole affair was so eloquent of rascality on the part of the dishonest, black-mustached Torre it was so inconceivable that his presence here now was not a part of dark design, so ridiculous to suppose that Antonio de la Guerra had ever really purposed disinheriting the girl who was dearer to him than daughters to most men—and yet what to do?

Suddenly Stanway bent forward, whispering swiftly, guardedly, to the girl.

And then, after Stanway had finished and stood erect again, looking down upon her, as Torre watched, his eyes narrowing suspiciously, her hand clenched, her chin squared, determination came into her mien and voice.

"It is a chance, senor," she said. She rose and stood looking at him steadily, still ignoring Torre. "It is a game of dice with our destinies."

"And you will play it, senorita?" eagerly from the American.

"She made a little gesture as though she were handing something to him. "I place the diebox in your hands. May I, Senor Billy?"

"Then," cried Stanway, "we must waste no time! Call Pedro."

She rang. Torre, still watching suspiciously, made no comment. Pedro came in his swift, silent fashion.

"Send word to Gaucha to come to the house immediately," Stanway told him. "Let him bring three men with him. Let them come armed. And see that Captain Juarez does not leave the house. I shall entertain Senor Torre."

A quick light of understanding leaped up in Pedro's eyes. He turned with a brief, grunted "Bueno," and hurried on his errand.

Torre had leaped to his feet, his face crimson.

"What does this mean?" he cried sharply. "As heir to the De la Guerra estates I demand—"

"Sit down!" Stanway's voice was very cool, but it rang with an unmissable sternness.

"We are going to begin our game of dice presently. And you will do well, senor, in playing your hand to keep right on smoking and—"

"Sit down!"

His hand moved a very little as he spoke, coming to rest upon his right hip. Torre sat down.

CHAPTER VI.

A Lawyer Plays Witness.

Billy Stanway awoke with a start. The late afternoon sun was streaming through the drawn curtains of the guestroom to which he had been taken, and Pedro stood over his bed.

"Vidal has brought Mr. Dempton back with him?" he asked, sitting up.

"Si, senor," grinned Pedro. "I think that Mr. Dempton did not like to come, but—and he shrugged eloquently—"you know Vidal, senor."

Torre and Juarez had had no word together? They know nothing of our having brought Dempton to the rancho?"

"No, senor."

Stanway slipped out of bed, his great sinewy body towering for a moment over the lesser form of the reed.

"You are a gentleman, Pedro," he said warmly. "Your master, when he comes back to us, will have you to thank as much as anyone. Now, will you ask your senorita to come to the library? And then will you see that Vidal brings the lawyer there?"

Pedro went about his errand, and Stanway, dressing swiftly, went to the library, which he had chosen because it was at one end of the house, and so a place in which to converse without fear of being overheard by Torre or the captain.

Vidal was there before him, a big man with a beautiful body and a scarred, ugly face. And with him, looking grotesquely small, pitifully inefficient in the presence of his guard, was Dempton.

"Mr. Stanway, sir!" The lawyer was upon his feet in an instant, his face red with anger, his speech seeming to froth up in a stream of barely articulated words from between his writhing lips. "Are you one of this damned conspiracy, sir? It is brigandage; it is outlawry; it is sheer defiance of every statute—"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dempton," said the rancher pleasantly. "There is no conspiracy on our part. We merely wish to ask you a few questions, even to give you a chance to get out of this mess skin-whole. Sit down. The senorita will be here in a moment."

The door opened and Teresa came in. She nodded brightly at Stanway, bestowed a look upon Vidal which plunged him into an ecstasy of delight, and with no word to Dempton went to Stanway's side.

"Have I kept you waiting?" she asked.

"No. I came in just a second before you." He drew out a chair for her and turned to Vidal. "Vidal, we have a few words to say to Mr. Dempton. Will you wait in the patio? I shall call you when we want you."

"Dempton," Stanway went on, "what passed between you and the Senor de la Guerra last night?"

"He sent for me to make a change in his will," said Dempton glibly. "He gave no reasons for what he was doing, although he must have noted my surprise."

"Did you know that he has been engaged during several years on his memoirs?"

Dempton, a lawyer trained to ask just such questions as that, looked at Stanway quickly, suspiciously. He hesitated a moment before answering.

"I have heard him speak of it," Stanway smiled at the girl, which she returned, and Dempton, plainly puzzled, watched them closely.

"The law is rather severe in the punishment it metes out to kidnappers, is it not, Mr. Dempton?"

"Yes."

"There is what you men of the law term an accessory before the fact?"

"Certainly," snapped the lawyer. "But if you care to consult me in a legal capacity—"

"I don't," lightly. "We are sending for Mr. Branson of Branson & Howard to advise us."

Dempton's tongue ran back and forth between his dry lips.

"Now," went on Stanley, without waiting for an answer, "how much money did Torre pay you for your part?"

Again Dempton had leaped to his feet, his face flushed, his eyes ablaze. "You mean to insinuate—"

"Sit down!" Stanway caught him by the shoulders and drove him back into his chair. "Did you know that after you had gone and before he was spirited away, Senor de la Guerra added certain notes to his memoirs?"

"What are you driving at?" fumed Dempton.

Stanway stepped to the door.

"Vidal," he called. "Mr. Dempton will remain here in the library. You will see that he does not grow lonesome? Bueno." He came back to Dempton's side and added quietly: "I am driving at this: the senor made certain observations upon the character of Americanos. He mentioned the fact that a certain man had just come and gone whom he did not trust; he stated why that man had come; he mentioned a flaw that that man had pretended to find—Ah!" as a look of sudden understanding and a quick fear with it leaped into Dempton's small eyes. "Now you see? Shall we leave them, senorita?"

Teresa stepped through the door, Stanway following and closing it after them.

"We'll have him scared out of his life in no time," he chuckled. "By tomorrow morning he'll be ready to tell everything he knows if we'll just promise him twenty-four hours to dig out in."

"You are very wonderful, Senor Billy!"

The look she flashed him was unmistakably full of gratitude; and his leaping hope sought to read something else in it.

"Teresa!" he whispered.

But she had slipped from him, laughing, and a lacy mantilla was in his hands, and from the far side of the room, as she whisked into the hallway, she waived him a kiss from her pink finger tips.

"Teresa!" he urged.

But the door had closed.

"And," he muttered, his eyes darkening, "after all, when I find her papa grande for her he's just going to run me off the rancho! Unless—By Jupiter! I've a notion to do it!"

He was thinking of Padre Ignacio, the priest at La Panza.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A Rat in a Trap?

Eduardo Ramon Torre, lounging before one of the deep windows of the drawing room, smoked his cigarettes and hummed gay snatches of song, evidently quite happy, seemingly unaware of the presence of Gaucha Morales and a prother vaquero, who, on the other hand, kept their eyes always upon the young Spaniard and their hard, brown hands close to their hips.

The door opened and Stanway came in. Torre did not turn, did not cease his gay music. The two vaqueros rose and stood looking at the American curiously.

"Torre," called Stanway bluntly.

Torre turned, smiled, ended a last high note clearly, and only then bowed very deeply to the rancher.

"Your companion will wait for me, in the patio I'll call you when I want you."

"Si, senor," responded the vaquero promptly. And from the door, as by way of afterthought: "We have not searched him, senor. No doubt he is armed."

"No doubt," dryly, from the rancher. "It is all right, Gaucha."

The two cowboys went out. Then pleasantly, insolently, Torre admitted to Stanway that he had been responsible for Senor de la Guerra's disappearance, that he knew where he was, and that the captain was his own agent.

"What," asked the rancher curiously, "do you gain from such an admission?"

"Two things, senor. In the first place I am meeting you upon a basis upon which we may be able to come to terms. It seems that you are really the one for me to deal with. In the second place," and the smile in his eyes was hard and cruel enough now, "I am taunting a man whom I do not like. That is a pleasure."

Stanway frowned, not understanding.

"Bring us back the senor and you gain your freedom—your safety, if you don't waste too much time getting out of the country," he said.

"You ask a great deal," Torre pulled thoughtfully at his little mustache. "And you offer a very little. For I shall have my freedom and safety—why, senor, at any time I please!"

"You refuse my offer?"

"Absolutely."

"Even," went on Stanway coolly, "after your personal danger is augmented by Dempton's confession of complicity?"

For the first time the rancher saw a quick light of fear leap into Torre's eyes. Then the lids dropped a little—a very little, but enough to hide the eyes—and in an instant Torre's manner was again careless, indifferent.

"A random shot that, no?" He lifted his eyes once more, and they were frank and mirthful again. "I am sorry that it does not find a target."

"What will you say when you are confronted with Dempton's written and signed confession?"

"That will never be. I know that he has confessed to nothing."

Stanway leaned forward and tapped his forefinger upon the table between them. "I shall have Dempton's confession within twenty-four hours!"

Torre shook his head, smiling his inscrutable smile.

"I have a counter-offer to make," said Torre. "Teresa is to pay to Captain Juarez the money which he demands—twenty thousand dollars. Within twenty-four hours from the time that the money is paid her grandfather will walk into this drawing room unharmed."

"And if she refuses your offer?"

"Then, twenty-four hours after her refusal, her grandfather will be dead. Then I shall be the heir to the entire property. You will accuse me of having murdered him, and I shall deny. It will go to the courts. In the end I shall be cleared. You see, senor, times are fortunately turbulent along the border, and what has happened may so easily be laid at the door of the poor devils of insurgents. You can create suspicion, you can make trouble. But then there is the will, properly drawn and witnessed, and—there is something else?"

"And that?" curiously, wondering how far Torre would go in showing his hand.

"There will be other witnesses of whom you do not guess yet—witnesses carefully selected, who will not be shaken in a point they make. And they will swear that Senor de la Guerra became very angry with his granddaughter upon the very day of his disappearance; that he quarreled openly with her; that he vowed he would disinherit her, and that he sent immediately for his lawyer to make the new will. Do you care, senor, to know what these witnesses will prove to be the cause of the quarrel?"

"Well?" asked Stanway.

"It will be that Teresa, heedless of her grandfather's hatred of all Americanos, had fallen in love with one of them; that she defied De la Guerra, and swore that she would marry—"

"Why?" gasped the rancher. "It's perjury!"

"Certainly." The smile merely deepened upon Torre's handsome face. "But let us think not of the legal morality of it but of the effect upon a jury. Who, when this point is made, will seem the one who would be desirous of the disappearance of the old gentleman?"

"Who then will appear in the light of the abductor? I leave it to you," busy over a new cigarette, "if the point will not hold."

Stanway's mouth hardened.

He saw that if Torre had made one mistake—if Dempton were in reality what he appeared, a weak tool—yet the young Spaniard had planned painstakingly elsewhere.

"You may mark a certain seeming discrepancy," went on the Spaniard. "I suppose the De la Guerra estate is worth a million. And I am asking only twenty thousand dollars to renounce all claim, free the old gentleman, go away and leave you, senor, to pay your court to the heiress!"

He laughed softly at Stanway's quick, angry frown, and continued swiftly:

"It is because I have very urgent need of ten thousand dollars. It would save me from an embarrassing position, senor. You do not guess how embarrassing. And I am very modestly asking merely twice my actual needs."

"True, there is more to gain by slitting the throat of my esteemed kinsman and inheriting the whole. You see, I don't mind speaking frankly, between friends